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Ronald G. Ehrenberg

Cornell University ILR School, rge2@cornell.edu

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Abstract

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Keywords

higher education, State University of New York, SUNY, Board of Trustees, Nancy Zimpher

Comments

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Nancy Zimpher: Perceptions from an “Unusual” SUNY Trustee

by

Ronald G. Ehrenberg¹

(Prepared for the SUNY Faculty Senate Bulletin)

¹ Irving M Ives Professor of Industrial and Labor Relations and Economics and Stephen H. Weiss Presidential Fellow at Cornell University, and Director of the Cornell Higher Education Research Institute (CHERI)

I. On Becoming a Trustee

Subject to the approval of the NYS Senate, the Governor appoints 15 people to the 18 person SUNY Board of Trustees. The other three members are the nonvoting presidents of the statewide 4-year and 2-year SUNY campus faculty governance bodies and the president of the statewide SUNY student governance unit.² The latter is a voting member, however as I shall argue below, I believe that whether these 3 members can vote is almost irrelevant to the roles they play and their importance as board members.

Appointment to the SUNY Board is typically a plum patronage position and appointees usually have some personal connection to the Governor or important people in the state who know the Governor. While I am a registered Democrat, I am a relatively apolitical person and I have never contributed large sums of money to any political candidate. My appointment to the SUNY Board was due to a rather unusual set of circumstances.

Many readers will remember that in March 2008, Elliot Spitzer resigned as Governor of NYS and was replaced by Lt. Gov. David Patterson. Most of Spitzer's senior aides left their positions when Spitzer resigned and a new relatively young aide in charge of higher education was walking in the Capitol that fall when he ran into the Cornell administrator in charge of state relations and casually mentioned that Gov. Patterson, needed to appoint a number of people to the SUNY Board. Our guy quickly said we have an expert on the economics of higher education on our faculty, he has been a Cornell vice president and is currently a Cornell trustee, he has written extensively on the issues facing public higher education, and to top it off, he is a graduate of SUNY. The Governor's aide was sent a number of things I had written and he saw something in them that led him to schedule a meeting for me with the Governor's appointments secretary.

At that meeting I told her that as a Cornell vice president my major goals was to make Cornell greater than the sum of its individual colleges by encouraging productive collaborations across our units. I said that as a trustee of the 64 campus SUNY system, my goal would be to make the system greater than the sum of its campuses. What I said most have made sense to her because in May 2009, Governor Patterson, who I never met, nominated me to become a member of the Board. I was confirmed by the NYS Senate in March 2010 in time for the board meeting that month.³

Meanwhile Nancy, who had been named the SUNY Chancellor in February 2009, had assumed her position in June 2009. What I did not know until I met her at the first board meeting I was permitted to attend as an observer, was that her goal as chancellor was exactly the same as mine. Our transformational Chancellor is SUNY's first leader who

² The president of the 2-year campus faculty governance body, the Faculty Council on Community Colleges, became a member when, after encouragement from Nancy Zimpher and the Board chair, the Governor and the Legislature enacted legislation to add that person to the board of trustees in 2011. Earlier, in 2007, the President of the University Faculty Senate had become a board member.

³ Then Chair Carl Hayden permitted me to attend SUNY Board meetings, save for executive sessions, until I was confirmed so I had almost a year to learn about the issues facing the system.

took on the task of making the system more than a set of 64 separate campuses and who harnessed its resources to make the whole better than the sum of its parts. She wanted each campus in every sector of the system to prosper. She tirelessly advocated on behalf of all of our colleges and worked every day to make SUNY the best higher education system in the nation. So in my role as a trustee, supporting the Chancellor, which is one of the primary responsibilities of the board, has been easy for me because I was so in synch with her goals.

The SUNY system's accomplishments during her years as chancellor are too numerous to list here and I will only note a few that I feel are extraordinarily important for the system's future:

1. The development of the **SUNY 2020** plan in which the Governor promised to halt cut backs in state appropriations for higher education and gave the system permission to increase instate undergraduate tuition by a predictable small amount each year for five years; this gave our campuses the ability to build back their resources after the cuts of previous years.⁴
2. The development of a **Seamless Transfer Initiative** to facilitate transfers from our 2-year campuses to our 4-year campuses.
3. The development of **Open SUNY** –a menu of high quality online classes and online degree programs offered by individual campuses. Subject to availability, students from one campus who can't find a class they need to graduate, or simply a class that interests them, on their own campus, can enroll in an Open SUNY class offered by another campus, subject to the approval by the campus at which the student is matriculated.
4. The development of a **Performance Funding Investment Program** to improve individual campus and system performance that encourages campuses to collaborate with each other in the development of their proposals.
5. The development of a **Shared Service Initiative** that included taking advantage of system wide scale discounts in purchasing and the consolidation of service provision between nearby SUNY campuses to achieve savings in administrative costs, which then could be directed back to the academic and student support missions of the campuses. During the first five years of the initiative the program reached a total of over \$108 million in savings, with \$30 million of this total being recurrent operating expenses. The program today continues under the title

⁴ A new five year tuition increase plan was approved in April 2017, which also provided for the promise of "maintenance of effort" funding as well. As with the prior agreement, no funding is provided to SUNY to compensate it for salary increases negotiated by NYS with the unions that represent SUNY employees or for increases in utility prices.

Operation Excellence and is focusing on continuous improvement in ongoing savings in areas such as strategic sourcing and shared IT platforms.⁵

6. Finally, and perhaps most important, a broader overall initiative to improve student success by increasing the effectiveness of remediation programs, reducing times to degree, improving graduation rates and dramatically expanding the number of students receiving degrees or program certificates from SUNY. This initiative clearly takes advantage of all of the other initiatives discussed above.

II. What Can I Say About Nancy?

Nancy is an extraordinary energetic leader who gave new meaning to the Chancellor's position being more than a 24/7 job. During the initial months of her tenure, she visited all 64 campuses and established a strategic planning process to define the goals of the system. This process included central administrators, campus administrators, faculty, students, trustees and alumni.⁶ She understood right from her start that a leader leads by building consensus and listening to the views of all stakeholders.

Nancy believes in articulating "Big Audacious" goals, setting time tables for reaching these goals, and developing metrics that can be used to publicly measure progress towards meeting the goals. While she knew the importance of having stable leadership at the top of the system, she also knew that her time in the position would be finite and this sometimes led her to publicly articulate big goals before the board had agreed upon them. She understood that a chancellor can never rest on her past laurels and continually introduced new programs and policies to move the system forward. This sometimes put stress on the campuses whose capacity to innovate was occasionally less than her ambition.

Nancy understood that in order to help make the system greater than the sum of its parts, the outside world needed to learn about SUNY. She spent an enormous amount of time externally publicizing what was going on at SUNY and with the aid of key staff hosted in NYC a series of annual national SUNY conferences on big issues in higher education. Each conference received considerable media attention and resulted in widely disseminated conference volumes published by SUNY Press. She also established the first SUNY System Foundation to generate revenues from private sources to help fund future system wide initiatives.

Our chancellor understood the key role that the campus presidents play. My rough calculation is that at least 5 to 7 presidential searches occurred each year that I was on the board. Searches for the campus presidents are run, in the case of our 4-year campuses, by their college councils and, in the case of our two-year campuses, by their campus boards of trustees. Each search is supposed to lead to two or three candidates being presented to the chancellor who then makes the final decision. Given her understanding of the key

⁵ Private email communication from Eileen McLaughlin, Vice Chancellor for Finance and Chief Financial (April 20, 2017)

⁶ While awaiting confirmation, I participated in this process as an alumnus of Binghamton University.

roles of the presidents, Nancy set very high standards for presidential appointments. In at least two cases, when she felt the recommended candidates were not up to what the campus needed in a leader, she rejected the recommendations and instructed the campuses to continue their searches.⁷

Nancy knew from her first day in office the importance of the two faculty and the student trustees, as well as the governance bodies that they led. Each of these trustees, as heads of their governance units, had an office in the SUNY administration building and she named each to her leadership cabinet that held monthly meetings. In many respects, these three trustees became in my view among the most important trustees because from their cabinet and faculty governance roles they had much better information about the issues being discussed than most of the other trustees. And because of the constituents they represented, our students and our faculty, when they spoke at board and committee meetings the other trustees listened very carefully and took their concerns very seriously. I view the fact that the two faculty trustees were nonvoting members as almost irrelevant to their effectiveness as board members and at times during my term on the board faculty trustees each served as chair, or acting chair, of the community college and academic affairs committees of the board. Both of the faculty trustees and the student trustee were also among the subset of trustees that were members of the search committee for Nancy's successor.

Shared governance is part of Nancy's DNA. So, for example, when the seamless transfer initiative was being developed, it was a bottom up process with faculty from across the two-year and four-year campuses determining the classes from each two-year college that would be accepted at each four-year college for transfer credit towards specific majors, rather than being dictated top down by administrative fiat. Nancy and her provosts heavily involved the faculty and student governance groups in the development and shaping of virtual all new initiatives. Because of their involvement in system wide decision making, the governance groups often felt able to provide political support for SUNY during budget discussions with the governor and the legislature.

Finally, Nancy had the capacity to keep her focus on the well-being of the system as a whole, even in the face of severe problems that could have caused mere mortals to think about whether staying in the position was worth it. To mention but a few of these problems. Early in her term as chancellor, a governor allowed us to raise tuition but took 80% of the increase in tuition back to help offset state budget problems. She and the board spent the better part of two years trying to develop a more rational budget allocation process that would provide incentives for campuses to behave in ways to help accomplish system goals; complaints by campuses that would receive less funding under such a plan led the political process to tell us to drop the idea. She and the board also spent years trying to stabilize Downstate Medical Center that had severe financial

⁷ Somewhat ironically given her understanding of the importance of campus presidents, when the system moved heavily into its shared services initiative, she went so far as to experiment with having two neighboring SUNY campuses have a single president. For reasons that should have been obvious to most observers, after the experiment took place on at least three pairs of campuses, that idea of having a president permanently responsible for more than one campus was dropped.

problems and trying to negotiate the sale of Long Island Community Hospital (LICH), which was losing millions of dollars a month and draining resources from the rest of the system. She had to deal with very serious issues relating to the leaders of Upstate Medical Center and SUNY Poly and to the finances and future of the latter institution. In each of these cases she did not lose her focus on the rest of the system and maintained her forward looking attitude. Her ability to cope with these problems was facilitated by her ability to delegate responsibilities to various senior administrators and to her relationship with our extraordinary chair during the latter years of her term, Carl McCall.

III. Final Thoughts

SUNY has been very lucky to have such a transformational chancellor who has truly helped to make the system much more than the sum of its parts. Nancy has long said that she hoped to stay in her role long enough to institutionalize many of the changes that have taken place. Her efforts have been facilitated in recent years by a system Provost, Alex Cartwright, who has made substantial efforts to involve campus presidents and provosts in discussions about proposed system policies long before the policies are adopted. But individual campus presidents do not like to view themselves as middle managers and their objectives for their own campuses may not always be in step with those of the system as a whole. It will be incumbent on the new chancellor to make sure the gains of the past years do not gradually fade away. Continuing to stress Nancy's shared governance efforts and involving all of the system governance bodies and other stakeholders in the discussions about the directions in which the system should will be of absolute importance.

My term as SUNY Trustee will most likely have ended by the time you are reading this piece. Being a member of the SUNY Board of Trustees has been one of the greatest honors of my career. As Pete Knuepfer and Ken O' Brien, past presidents of the University Faculty Senate who I served on the board with, can attest, my major contribution to the board may well have been my continually reminding my fellow board members that academic decisions are best made by academics. I believe most of the board has fully internalized this proposition.

